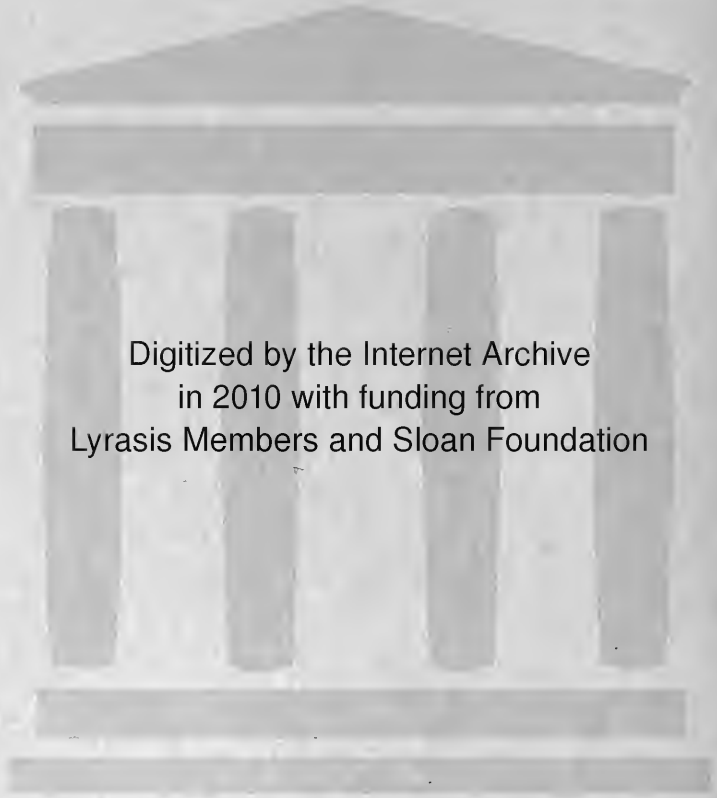


VOL. 31
NO. 2
WINTER, 1982
ONE DOLLAR

Four
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Quarters





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Four Quarters

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What Do You Know About The “Doughboy”?

Notice in local New Jersey paper

MATTHEW WILSON

November's soldier cast in concrete,
you're sixty years of faded feature

at the Y of state and country roads.
You're interrogatory here, at the point,

saucer-shape helmet. advancing rifle,
a stance of charge, your ranks culled

by the withering of time.
What do we know of the doughboy?

Mud-man, you never took this pose
in the stale trenches; your name we've

made a commercial puppet of, pillsbury
doughboy, unheard incongruity, unseen

interloper, you rent our memories:
you boiled your dumplings once,

bitched the lard-ass generals,
come home, quick and stiff,

—boys, a commemoration of our loss—
never imagining a town's weathering,

our loss of your representation.

Ten years ago, Matthew Wilson's undergraduate poem appeared here. He has since taught at Temple and Rutgers Universities, and his essay on A.R. Ammons will appear in Contemporary Poetry.

The Master of Ceremonies

A Play in One Act

ROBERT M. SCHWARTZ

SCENE: A living room in a modest apartment. A Summer evening. The time is the present.

AT RISE: A FATHER and his two young DAUGHTERS, six and eight, are seated on the couch. The FATHER sits happily between the TWO GIRLS. As the curtain rises, the FATHER is clapping his hands and talking excitedly.

FATHER

“Encore! Encore! Encore!” they all cried. And when I finished taking my bow, I ran up to Miss Secunda and I said, “Now can I have that Hershey bar you promised me?” And she opened up her bag and took out the biggest candy bar you ever saw—this wide!

(Daughters laugh)

and in front of everyone she said, “I was only going to give you half. but you played so well I’m going to let you have it all.”

(Daughters applaud)

And of course I went home, ate the whole thing, and got so sick I didn’t go to school for two days. And that was the story of Miss Secunda and the candy bar.

(Daughters laugh and clap their hands)

DAUGHTER #1: More! More!

DAUGHTER #2: Another one. Another story.

DAUGHTER #1: One More.

DAUGHTER #2 Please. *Please!*

DAUGHTER #1: Tell us one more story about Miss Secunda.

FATHER: I've already told you one.

DAUGHTER #1: Tell us one more. Please, Daddy. Please!

FATHER: But it's late, and you're not even dressed.

DAUGHTER #1: Just one more. Just one more.

DAUGHTER #2: Yes. One more. Just one more.

FATHER: Look at your hair. You can't leave it like that.

DAUGHTER #1: I'll brush it. Just tell one more story about Miss Secunda. Please.

DAUGHTER #2: Yes! Just one more story and then we'll brush our hair.

DAUGHTER #1: Please. Please.

DAUGHTER #2: Please. Please.

FATHER: All right. All right. One more. But just *one*.

DAUGHTER #1: Tell us about the time they took you to that lady eye doctor—the one that couldn't speak English.

DAUGHTER #2: No! Tell us when you didn't do your homework and they came to school to see your teacher.

DAUGHTER #1: I want to hear about the eye doctor!

DAUGHTER #2: The teacher and the homework!

(Ad lib argument)

FATHER: All right. All right. We'll compromise. I'll tell you about my first piano lesson.

DAUGHTER #1 (*Clapping her hands*): Yes! Tell us about that.

DAUGHTER #2: Yes! That's a good one.

FATHER: Well, let me see now. (*The children snuggle back in*

their seats) My first piano lesson . . . I was about four years old.

DAUGHTER #2: You said you were five years old.

FATHER: Yes, that's right. I was five years old, (*One daughter smiles smugly to the other*) and I was playing outside in the street and somehow I fell down and bruised my knee.

DAUGHTER #1: You fell off your bicycle.

FATHER: That's right (*Good humored*) Say, who's telling this story? (*Daughters laugh*) I fell off my bicycle sooo . . . I started to cry for my mommy.

(This strikes daughters as funny, although they laugh rather forcedly because they've heard this story before)

In fact, I cried all the way upstairs—but when I got there no one was home. I remembered my mother was taking a piano lesson in a neighbor's apartment and I wasn't supposed to disturb her. But somehow my mother heard my sobs and came out to see what was the matter. "I fell down," I cried. "Shush! What will Miss Secunda think?" she said, "if you keep crying like this?" But I didn't care. I didn't know who Miss Secunda was. I was just having a good ol' cry for myself. Then I heard a soft voice say, "If you stop crying, I'll let you play the piano too. Just like your mother." I looked up and this tiny woman . . .

DAUGHTER #1: Miss Secunda?!!

FATHER (*nodding*): Miss Secunda . . . was holding her hand out to me. And even though she spoke very softly, I felt I *had* to obey her, so transfixed was I by the sound of her voice. She led me to the piano and then she unpinned a very beautiful lacy blue handkerchief from her jacket lapel and made me dry my eyes. "That's better," she said, and then she sat me down and asked, "Now, where do you suppose Middle C is?" and she took my little finger and placed it on the keyboard, and when I played Middle C she hugged me hard and said, "Aahh! I knew you were going to be a natural musician." And that was my first piano lesson.

DAUGHTER #1 (*proudly*): And tonight she's coming to our house for dinner. Isn't she?

FATHER: That's right. Tonight she's coming to our house for dinner.

DAUGHTER #1: Will she give me a piano lesson?

FATHER: Maybe. If she likes you.

DAUGHTER #1: I want her to like me.

DAUGHTER #2: I want her to like me too!

FATHER (*laughing*): I'm sure she will. Miss Secunda always loved children. And they always loved her.

DAUGHTER #1: Did you have to practice very hard?

FATHER: I never had to practice at all.

DAUGHTER #1 (*wide-eyed*): Marcia Jamison takes piano lessons and her mother makes her practice every day.

FATHER (*boastfully*): Well, I had a lesson every day, so I didn't have to practice.

DAUGHTER #1: Are you going to play for Miss Secunda tonight?

FATHER (*laughs*): Oh, I hardly think so.

DAUGHTER #2: How come you don't play the piano anymore?

FATHER: Because I'm not a musician anymore. I'm an executive, and executives don't practice the piano. They're busy working in offices.

(The MOTHER enters. Rather pretty, somewhat flashy good looks. Intelligent and down-to-earth)

MOTHER: Good Lord: Aren't you guys dressed yet? I've put the roast in the oven, peeled the potatoes, tossed the salad, baked the bread, set the table, cleaned, and vacuumed, and I'm still going to be ready before any of you.

FATHER: What time is it?

MOTHER: Seven fifteen—and Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin are due at eight.

FATHER (*rises*): Wow! We better get a move on.

MOTHER: I've been saying that since six o'clock. You guys are not going to be ready when they ring that doorbell.

DAUGHTER #2: Daddy says he's not going to play for Miss Secunda tonight.

MOTHER (*fluffing up the pillows*): Oh, why? I should think she'd be very interested in hearing her old pupil play again.

FATHER: Yes. I'm sure she'd love it.

MOTHER: Why not? See what you've retained after all these years.

FATHER: I'm afraid you retain very little if you don't practice for fifteen years. (*Dreamily*) Fifteen years. Did you kids know that when I started taking piano lessons the subway was only five cents? So were the hot dogs at Nathan's in Coney Island.

MOTHER: Good ol' Nathan's.

FATHER: I always stopped and had a hot dog on my way home from a lesson. God, how I loved those frankfurters! I'd travel back and forth every day, and I never got tired of eating them.

DAUGHTER #2: Every day?

FATHER: Every day.

MOTHER: Maybe I should have served hot dogs for dinner.

FATHER: Can you imagine—five cents for a frankfurter?

MOTHER: I can't imagine having a lesson every day.

FATHER: Well, I did. I remember that even when I'd leave Miss Secunda's house crying because I didn't have a good lesson, I'd brighten up because I knew in another twenty minutes I'd be eating at Nathan's and I'd start fishing in my pocket for loose change. Maybe even stop in at the Penny Arcade.

DAUGHTER #1: Why did you have a lesson every day?

FATHER: Well now, I wasn't supposed to. My mother only paid for one every week, but Miss Secunda would make up stories just to get me there. She'd call my mother in the morning and say, "Little Carrie Sue is sick today and isn't coming for her lesson, and since the time is paid for—why not send *you know who* in her place?" And when I'd get home from school, my mother would give me a quarter and put me on the train and ship me off to Miss Secunda's for another lesson. And that's how I got to eat a hot dog every day too.

MOTHER: I thought you said Miss Secunda used to feed you. What about all that blueberry milk and those cookies she baked for you?

FATHER: That was right *after* school. Nathan's was a snack *before* I got back on the train to go home again.

MOTHER: Nathan's! Blueberry milk! Why couldn't you just take a

piano lesson like everyone else?

FATHER: She wanted me to drink milk. Said it was healthy and I didn't like milk so she experimented with different syrups—till she found one I liked. And I liked blueberry.

MOTHER: My God!

FATHER (*to daughters*): You know she used to say I was the most beautiful little boy she ever saw. (*He begins to tickle them playfully.*)

DAUGHTERS (*Laughing*): Oh Daddy. (*They tickle him back*)

MOTHER: All right. All right. That's enough. That's enough. C'mon, we've got work to do. (*The tickling goes on. Finally the Father breaks loose, rises, and runs to a floor lamp and embraces it*)

FATHER: Olly olly olly! Home free! One two three! (*Daughters chase him down*)

DAUGHTERS (*tagging him*): Gotchya!

FATHER: No no! I reached home before you tagged me.

DAUGHTERS: No, no! We got you. We got you.

FATHER: No, no, no. You have to tag me *before* I touch home base. You didn't do that.

MOTHER: All right. All right. That's enough. C'mon girls. Up and at 'em! Let's finish our dressing. (*She shoos them off*)

MOTHER: Honestly, I don't know who the bigger kid is.

FATHER: I am.

MOTHER: I guess. (*He grabs her and kisses her*)

FATHER: Did you get the dessert?

MOTHER: Yes, I got the dessert.

FATHER: I mean the sherbet.

MOTHER: I know you mean the sherbet.

FATHER: What about the wafers?

MOTHER: Yes, those too. God forbid we didn't have those wafers.

FATHER: Well, I remember Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin

liked them, and what's the sense of having people to dinner if you don't serve them something they like? I'm just trying to be a good host.

MOTHER: You're a very good host. And I'm sure it will be a lovely evening. Now, why don't you finish dressing?

FATHER: All right. Don't patronize me. I'm going.

*(As he exits, the Daughters re-enter.
They are wearing different blouses)*

DAUGHTERS: We can't reach the buttons!

MOTHER: Here, let me help you. *(She buttons the back of one of the blouses)*

DAUGHTER #1: Is Miss Secunda going to sleep over?

MOTHER: No. Just supper. And I think for her first visit in fifteen years, supper is quite enough, don't you think? Stand still, please.

DAUGHTER #2: She could have my bed.

MOTHER: That's very thoughtful of you, but I'm sure she'll want to sleep in her own bed tonight. Oh! Before I forget—at the dinner table, try and remember *not* to scrape your fork in your mouth. You know how it upsets your father to hear that. O.K. You're all buttoned. Now put on your slacks. I left them nice and pressed on your beds.

(Daughters exit back into the bedroom as the Father reappears)

FATHER: Do you know where my blue and yellow tie is? *(As he passes daughters)* I'll take one hug and one kiss from each of you. *(Daughters hug and kiss their Father—then exit)* Did you see that?

MOTHER: Did I see what?

FATHER: They have nail polish on.

MOTHER: I know. They think they're being very grown up.

FATHER: I didn't notice it before. Who put it on them?

MOTHER: I did.

FATHER *(forced laugh)*: Nail polish?

MOTHER: Well tonight's a big event.

FATHER: Nail polish?

MOTHER: They're having fun.

FATHER: They've never worn nail polish before.

MOTHER: Listen, it was a choice between high heels and lipstick or a little red nail polish. I chose nail polish. Besides it's only water paint.

FATHER: Yeah, well maybe we ought to wash it off.

MOTHER: You should have seen them prancing around here this afternoon. They went from six to sixty in one day.

FATHER: How do we get them to be six again?

MOTHER: The little one says to me. Me, mind you—her mother—while I'm putting on the nail polish, she says, "I want something attractive, but not too obvious" (*laughs*).

FATHER: I don't know . . .

MOTHER: Oh, it's very normal and natural to want to act grown up.

FATHER: Yeah, but nail polish . . . (*He takes the pillows off the couch and absentmindedly puts them on the chairs*).

MOTHER: Don't you think you better finish dressing?

(A pause. The Father starts out. Puffs up another pillow as his wife stands there looking at him. He notices her watching)

FATHER: They look limp.

MOTHER: Will you get out of here already! I've got a million last-minute things to do and you're in the way.

FATHER (*starts to exit, turns back*): I don't think they look right over there.

MOTHER: I'll fix it. (*Motions for him to leave. He walks to the Hall Closet as she places the pillows back where they were originally*). What's the matter now?

FATHER (*looking through the closet*): I came in here to ask you about my tie. You know, the one with the funny pattern running through it. Shaped like a bolt of lightning?

MOTHER (*confused*): I don't know what you're talking about.

FATHER: Yes you do. Remember the tie. You said, "All you need now is a cape with the letter "S" on it."

MOTHER: That was years ago.

FATHER: I know. So where is it?

MOTHER: You have to be kidding. I don't know what you did with that tie. You probably threw it out.

FATHER: Threw it out? Miss Secunda gave me that tie. Why would I throw it out?

MOTHER: Maybe I threw it away. I don't know. Why wear a tie anyway? It's going to be hot in here tonight.

FATHER: Listen, Miss Secunda is going to expect me to wear it.

MOTHER: After fifteen years?

FATHER: First thing she'll probably say when she sees me is "Oh! I thought you would have on that tie I gave you." She has a memory for things like that.

MOTHER: Well, you better start looking for it then. *(He starts to walk off. Now he turns back. Starts to speak. Doesn't)*

FATHER *(after a long pause)*: Do me a favor. . . *(forced laugh)* Don't mention anything about what a shame it is I'm not playing the piano anymore, O.K.? I know it sounds silly but I'd just as soon not bring up that subject tonight—if you don't mind. *(He starts to walk off)*.

MOTHER: What if they ask you to play? *(Father turns back—gives her a hard look)* I'm just asking.

FATHER: Well don't. I'm not ready to play . . . unless they want to hear "Chopsticks."

MOTHER: *(Shrugs)*: Maybe you shouldn't have stopped. I remember when I met you—you played very well.

FATHER: There! That's what I mean. Don't say that tonight.

MOTHER: What *would* you like me to talk about?

FATHER: Just don't mention anything about music, o.k.?

MOTHER: Why don't we throw a bedsheet over the piano? That way no one will notice and ask you to play.

FATHER: I hope you're not going to make too many smartass remarks tonight.

MOTHER: I could eat in the kitchen.

FATHER (*He knows he can't win*): I'm going to look for that tie. No sense wasting my time fighting with you.

MOTHER: Better shave too. You look a little scruffy.

FATHER (*Stops. Looks at her*): Why don't *you* get dressed?

MOTHER: I *am* dressed.

FATHER: I thought you were going to wear the dressy dress.

MOTHER: I was, but it's too warm for that.

FATHER (*pause*): What about your hair?

MOTHER: What about it?

FATHER: Aren't you going to fix it?

MOTHER: Why? What's wrong with it?

FATHER: It looks tired.

MOTHER: Now who's being a smartass?

FATHER: I just wanted to show you off.

MOTHER: Well, you'll have to show off my cooking.

FATHER: You mean you're not going to fix your hair?

MOTHER: I made a nice meal.

FATHER: I wanted you to look pretty. I told them you were a very beautiful woman.

MOTHER: Well, thank you sir. But if they're looking for beauty they're coming to the wrong restaurant. All of us gremlins didn't have time to get to everything today.

FATHER: First impressions mean a lot, you know.

MOTHER: So?

FATHER: So, I've been waiting a long time to introduce you to Miss Secunda.

MOTHER: So what are you intimating? She won't like me if my hair isn't curled?

FATHER: You always fix it when we go out. I just thought you'd put it up. You know, nice and pretty—like you do.

MOTHER: Well, I told you. I didn't have time today. I had to clean up the house, shop for food, find the old recipes . . . *(suddenly)* Oh my God! the bread! I have to take the bread out of the oven.

(She exits hurriedly. Daughters, fully dressed, enter and run to the piano. They begin to argue whose turn it is to play. The following dialogue overlaps)

DAUGHTER #2: It's *my* turn to play!

DAUGHTER #1: I got here first!

DAUGHTER #2: You played before. It isn't fair.

DAUGHTER #1: I don't care!

DAUGHTER #2: I'm telling Mommy.

(An argument ensues, Rather heavy)

FATHER: Girls! Girls! Stop it! That's enough.

DAUGHTER #1: I got here first!

DAUGHTER #2: It's my turn to play!

FATHER: Stop it. Stop it.

DAUGHTER #2: She's hogging the piano.

DAUGHTER #1: No I'm not. She's lying.

DAUGHTER #2: I want to practice for Miss Secunda.

DAUGHTER #1: Me too.

FATHER: No one is going to play for Miss Secunda. My goodness, what noises the two of you make. What would Miss Secunda think if she heard the two of you arguing so? *(Daughters are suddenly still)* What does Miss Secunda think of little girls who fight between themselves?

DAUGHTER #1: She says it's not ladylike.

DAUGHTER #2: And anyone with breeding never raises her voice . . .

DAUGHTER #1: Or makes an issue out of things.

FATHER: Right! And you wouldn't want Miss Secunda or Miss Benjamin to think I didn't raise you properly, would you?

DAUGHTER #1: No.

DAUGHTER #2: No.

FATHER: That's my girls. (*Kneeling*) And remember not to scrape your fork in your mouth tonight. (*They nod in agreement*) And if you want something at the table—what do you say?

DAUGHTERS: Please!

FATHER: Right. And don't forget as soon as you sit down, place the napkin in your lap . . . just like I taught you.

DAUGHTERS: We remember.

FATHER: Good. Now let me see your hands.

DAUGHTER #2 (*Showing her hands proudly*): Mommy put it on!

FATHER (*shakes his head*): Hmmm . . .

DAUGHTER #1: If we behave, then can we have piano lessons?

FATHER: I don't know. Miss Secunda lives too far away now. Who would take you there?

DAUGHTER #2: Couldn't we have another teacher?

DAUGHTER #1: We could get Marcia Jamison's teacher. She lives around the corner.

FATHER: I don't know Marcia Jamison's teacher. I don't know anyone but Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin. And they were the best! You wouldn't want me to get you anyone but the best, would you?

DAUGHTER #1: We just want to play the piano like you did.

FATHER: Well if we can find a teacher as loving as Miss Secunda or as knowledgeable as Miss Benjamin, we'll give you lessons. You know Miss Secunda never raised her voice. Never got angry. That's why everyone loved her so. I remember the children always made little thank-you speeches after their recitals. It was very sweet and touching.

DAUGHTER #1: Did you play at the recitals?

FATHER: Oh yes! You had to. I was even the Master of Ceremonies at most of them.

DAUGHTER #2: What's that?

FATHER (*Sits them down. They laugh.*) The Master of Ceremonies? My God, that was a great honor to be the Master of Ceremonies. (*Playfully erect*) "And now our next pianist, Irma Jacobson, age nine, will play the Minute Waltz in A Flat . . . fifty eight, fifty nine, sixty. Thank you Irma. (*Claps his hands*) And then little Irma would curtsy (*He curtsies*) and say her thank-you speech, and then I'd come out and say, "and now Cynthia Sachem, age seven, who has only been studying for eight months will play the Rondo from Book Two by Wilhelm . . ." something or other—and little Cynthia would come out, curtsy, and then she'd play the Rondo.

DAUGHTER #2: What did the boys have to do?

FATHER: The boys had to bow. Very low. Like this. (*Demonstrates*). Miss Secunda was always making me practice my bow.

DAUGHTER #2: How old were you?

FATHER: At my first recital? I was six years old. Of course I wasn't the Master of Ceremonies then. In fact, I was so little I had to sit on two telephone books to reach the keys. I played "Susie, Little Susie," and I was such a big hit I had to play my piece twice! (*laughs*). Can you imagine me sitting on two telephone books and playing "Susie, Little Susie"? I still remember it, too. (*He goes to the piano, plays, and sings*)

*Susie, Little Susie, pray what is the news?
The geese are running barefoot because they've no shoes
The Cobbler has leather, but no . . .*

(*Pause*)

I forgot what!

(*Singing again*)

*Who will make the goslings
A pair of new shoes?*

(*Daughters laugh and applaud. The Mother re-enters*)

MOTHER: Very nice. (*Kidding him*) You see, you can play something. You could play "Susie, Little Susie" for Miss Secunda. (*Picks up a cigarette to light it*) C'mon, girls, you have to finish putting you things away. I'll bet you left your rooms a mess. C'mon! Out you go!

(They exit into the bedroom)

FATHER: I was just telling the girls about me being the Master of Ceremonies for those recitals. Of course that was before the speeches.

MOTHER: What speeches?

FATHER: The speeches they composed for us to recite. We all sounded like little geniuses. I was eleven years old and I was mouthing words like “mystical passages” and “themes recapitulating.” *(Laughs)*. The only problem was while you were announcing what you were going to play, you were getting nervous about playing it—and while you were playing, you worried about what you had to announce.

MOTHER: All that fuss and bother. Why couldn’t you kids just play the piece?

FATHER: I told you—because we were suppose to be little geniuses. I remember I couldn’t say “Chopin” the way they wanted. I always said “SHOW-PAN” and they wanted me to say “SHOW-PAA.”

MOTHER: It sounds to me like they made everything into a big production. What little kid really cares about all that. If he can just get through it that ought to be enough.

FATHER: One year when I was doing the em-ceeding, we had a girl whose name was Gloria Smackaler, but Miss Secunda wanted me to pronounce it “Smook-a-ler”. Now, I had heard Gloria say it herself—“Smackaler”—so I couldn’t understand why Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin wanted me to pronounce it “Smook-a-ler.” Well, they drilled me and drilled me and made me so damn nervous about it that on the day of the recital, I went out there, and said, “And now, here is Gloria . . . SCHMUCKLER!”

(Wife laughs)

And the next year when I had to say “Cecilia Lipshitz” I quit.

MOTHER: Such a production. Who needed all that extra crap?

FATHER: Do you have to talk like that?

MOTHER: Sor-ree! Mustn’t use foul language. Especially in front of Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin.

FATHER: You don’t have to talk like a truck driver.

MOTHER: I beg your pardon.

FATHER: I don't think they'd understand your sense of humor.

MOTHER: All right. All right. I'll be very good and very "genteel."
Not like my usual "swearin' " and "cussin' " and "spittin' " self.

FATHER: You know what I mean. I want to create a *nice impression*.

MOTHER: Well, I hope we won't let you down. (*She kisses him*).

(*Pause*)

FATHER: I want you to do me a favor.

MOTHER: Yes?

(*Another pause*)

FATHER: It's a small thing to ask.

MOTHER: Yes?

FATHER: And it's just for tonight . . .

MOTHER: I'm listening.

FATHER: Don't smoke.

MOTHER: Oh for God sakes.

FATHER: It's just for tonight.

MOTHER: That is ridiculous.

FATHER: It's only a small favor.

MOTHER: I can't stop smoking.

FATHER: Miss Secunda is allergic to cigarette smoke.

MOTHER: How do you know? You haven't seen her for fifteen years.

FATHER: I know.

MOTHER: I'll smoke in the kitchen then.

FATHER: It's only for tonight.

MOTHER: It's impossible for me to go a whole evening without smoking. You know that. I'll go in the bathroom.

FATHER: Look, I'm serious. It means a lot to me. I would not like her to see you smoking.

MOTHER: Why not?

FATHER: Can't you do me *one* favor?

MOTHER: All right. All right. I'll only smoke one after coffee. How's that?

FATHER: You can't smoke *any*. It's a dirty filthy habit. I don't even want the ashtrays out. (*Starts putting them away*).

MOTHER: You sound crazy. Positively looney.

FATHER: Fine. I'm glad you think so. Now, could you empty that ashtray over there for me?

MOTHER (*Upset*): I'm going to check the roast. (*Starts to exit into kitchen*).

FATHER (*knows her feelings are hurt*): Honey! . . .

MOTHER (*turns*): What?

FATHER: I want her to like you, that's all.

MOTHER: And she won't like me if I smoke?

FATHER: I just think it would make things easier if you didn't.

MOTHER: And what about me liking her? Does that matter?

(He doesn't quite know what to say to that. A pause. She exits into the kitchen. He stands there a moment feeling a bit foolish. He begins putting the ashtrays away. Now he spies something that bothers him. He walks over to the piano and picks up a picture in a silver frame. The picture is of a nine-year-old boy seated at a piano.

He decides it doesn't belong in the room. He takes it off the instrument and begins looking for a place to put it. He opens the closet door and puts it in there. By this time, the Mother re-enters carrying a handful of silverware. She begins placing the knives, forks, and spoons on the table)

MOTHER: (*defensively*): What time do you want me to start serving dinner?

FATHER: Oh, about ten or fifteen minutes after they're here. (*Pause*). Don't be angry.

MOTHER: I'm not angry.

FATHER: Serve the dinner whenever you think it's right.

(Looking over her shoulder)

MOTHER: What are you doing?

FATHER: I just want to see if the knives and forks are clean.

MOTHER: Of course they're clean! What do you think I'm doing—
putting down dirty silverware?

FATHER: Just looking. Just looking.

MOTHER: Honestly! You really are something!

FATHER: Well, what time will we eat?

MOTHER: It should be about forty minutes after they get here.

FATHER: Forty??

MOTHER: Yes, forty.

FATHER: What are we going to do for forty minutes?

MOTHER: How about having a conversation . . .
(And then, because she cannot resist)
about the evils of smoking?

(He glares at her)

Well, you haven't seen them in fifteen years—you should have something to talk about. You're a very good conversationalist.

FATHER: Trouble is . . . I don't know if we'll get to do any of the talking.

MOTHER: So then there's nothing to worry about. We'll just listen.

FATHER: God, it's amazing how simple you can make everything sound.

MOTHER: Well, isn't it? People come to your house. You feed them.
You talk. You drink. You play games. You do whatever.

FATHER: I wish it were over already.

MOTHER *(genuinely surprised)*: Why?

FATHER: I don't know. It's a strain. Having someone to your house you haven't seen in a long time.

MOTHER: Don't be silly. It's wonderful. They can see how you've

grown and what you've done with your life. I think it's fascinating. Like a reunion. *(She walks over to him—places her arms around his shoulder)* I'm sure everything will turn out fine. They're going to meet your family and see where you live and find out what you do for a living. By the time you get started talking—you'll see, you'll forget what time it is and so will I, and I'll probably burn the dinner. We'll have a wonderful evening.

FATHER: Oh, tonight will you try to get something into the conversation about how important you think vegetables are.

MOTHER: What?!

FATHER: When I was a little kid my mother only fed me canned peas. Miss Secunda liked to boast that she introduced me to spinach and asparagus. She use to say she was the only one who really knew how to take care of me.

MOTHER: Well she'll be happy to know we're having Broccoli with Hollandaise sauce tonight.

FATHER: Good. Good. She'll like that. Oh, and after we eat, try not to leave the dishes in the sink too long. In fact, I'll help you wash them. *(Pause)* Don't give me a look. Just do it. Please. I remember after dinner Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin would both scurry around and put on their rubber gloves and do the dishes. And I had to run out with the garbage. *(She laughs)* It isn't funny. *(Pause. Now he starts to laugh)*. I wouldn't be at all surprised if after dinner they make me jump up and take out the garbage. They couldn't let dirt or dust pile up for a minute. And Heaven help you if you came to their house with dirty hands! She'd get out the rubbing alcohol faster than you could say "Rimsky Korsakov" and scrub the doorknobs and walls and God knows what else you might have touched. *(Laughs again)* I gotta tell you—between the vegetables and taking out the garbage and her berating me about my dirty hands—that once, when I left her house, I went downstairs and peed on her front door.

MOTHER: You didn't?

FATHER: I did.

MOTHER *(laughs)*: How awful!

FATHER: I don't know why I did it—except, of course, I was very angry.

MOTHER: I guess.

FATHER: It only happened once.

MOTHER: I think I'll tell Miss Secunda. Can you see me passing those damn wafers and saying, "By the way, after supper, we have a special treat for you. Your old pupil is going to pull down his pants and"

FATHER: All right. All right.

MOTHER: She probably knew it was you all along anyway.

FATHER: She did not! She'd never suspect any such thing. I was too much of a goody goody in her eyes.

MOTHER: You never know. She might be much smarter than you think.

FATHER (*deadly serious*): Drop it, huh?

MOTHER (*teasingly*): Why not confess all tonight? It would be good for your soul. Like in church.

FATHER: I said let's drop it.

MOTHER: God, you're such an old poop. I'm sure Miss Secunda would get a terrific laugh out of the whole thing.

FATHER: You don't know Miss Secunda. She'd be terribly shocked.

MOTHER (*playfully*): Then let's shock her.

FATHER: Will you stop it. I don't want her to think I was an obscene little kid.

MOTHER: Is that what you think it was? Obscene?

FATHER: Well, I wouldn't think it was the classiest thing if someone *I* knew did it.

MOTHER: On the contrary. It would have been the classiest thing if afterwards you yelled up at the window and said, "I just peed all over your front door."

(*Daughters re-enter*)

DAUGHTER #: Is Miss Secunda here yet?

MOTHER: No, but she will be soon. Is your room picked up?
(*Jokingly aside to her husband*) Miss Secunda likes cleanliness.

DAUGHTERS (*together*): It's all picked up.

MOTHER: Good, then you can help me in the kitchen.

FATHER: They have to change into the dresses.

MOTHER: What dresses?

FATHER: Those pink pastel things. You know. The dresses we bought for Whathisname's Confirmation?

MOTHER: What's *whose* name?

FATHER: That nephew of yours.

MOTHER: That was two years ago.

FATHER: So?

MOTHER: They've grown since then. They'd never be able to get into those dresses. Besides, I don't even know where they are.

FATHER: Why don't we look for them.

MOTHER: Why?

FATHER: Please. I want everyone to look nice. I think we should be dressed.

MOTHER: We *are* dressed.

FATHER: I mean *dressed*.

MOTHER (*not angrily*): Good God, what do you want the children and me to wear? Evening gowns?

FATHER: I'm just out to make a good impression. What's wrong with that?

MOTHER: It sounds more like we have to pass a general inspection! (*This jars him and he stares angrily at her*) All right! All right! Don't *glare* at me. C'mon, girls. Let's go look for those dresses.

DAUGHTER #1 (*disappointed*): Oh, can't we wear these pants?

MOTHER: No, we can't. We have to change.

FATHER: Thank you.

MOTHER: Honestly!

(The three exit. Left alone, the Father looks at the piano for a moment. He turns away, thinking, trying to remember something. Something he put away a long time ago. Now he begins to rifle through the bookshelves and in the record cabinet. Finally he finds what he is looking for. He takes out a record from a fragile, aged receptacle, and places it delicately on the stereo. Now he puts the needle on the record, and waits a moment. We hear the sound of a very tense and high-pitched fourteen year-old boy)

VOICE: Frederic Chopin was one of the great Romantic composers. He gave much to composition that was original. He developed the idea of Rubato and created many new categories in piano selections. Among his best works are the Preludes, Mazurkas, and Etudes. While the word "Etude" means a study, in Chopin's case each Etude not only prepares the pianist to overcome some difficult feat in piano technique, but is a piece of magnificent beauty. Each one of his Etudes can thus be classified. I shall play a group of three Chopin Etudes. The first, the "Black Key" Etude in G Flat, trains the pianist to play with velocity and clarity on the Black keys. The second is the Etude in E. Here the emphasis is upon "cantabile" execution. The final Etude in C Minor is the "Revolutionary," which is a study for the left hand. It was named the "Revolutionary" Etude because of its dramatic qualities.

(After the speech, the piano is heard. The playing is quite beautiful, and even remarkable, for a fourteen year-old. The Father listens intently, and then without waiting for it to finish, he takes the needle away and stops the record. Now he goes to the piano himself. He sits down and begins to play the same piece, the "Black Key" Etude. The playing is not the same. He makes quite a few mistakes, and the tempo is much slower. Now, he starts all over, as if starting from the beginning will correct the mistakes. But of course he makes even more mistakes now. He winces every time he hits a "clinker." Now he rises and pulls open the piano bench and begins to look for something inside the bench. He pulls out a book of music and places it on the music stand. Looking at it intently, he begins to play the same piece—from the beginning. More "tripping" and "slipping." The Mother reappears. She also appears to be searching for something. She opens the front hall closet)

FATHER *(Still playing)*: Listen to all these wrong notes.

MOTHER: You haven't practiced for a long time.

FATHER: My fingers are so stiff.

MOTHER (*Pulling boxes out of the closet. Almost to herself*): I don't know where those dresses are.

FATHER: Miss Benjamin didn't want to teach me this. I remember how horrified she was when Miss Secunda suggested I play it. "The Black Key Etude?? Oh, Thelma, he could *never* play that!" She was right too. It damned near killed the both of us.

MOTHER: I have to look through all these boxes.

FATHER: Miss Benjamin would always say the same things: "Maybe he isn't ready to learn the Brahms Rhapsodies." And then Miss Secunda would smile as if it were all a joke and she'd wink at me and say, "He'll practice this time. Really he will. Won't you?" And I'd look up and nod—even though I didn't know why the hell I was saying "Yes". And as I got older and the work got harder, Miss Benjamin would really have a fit. She'd scream "The Pathetique??" or "The Fantasie Impromptu??" I mean she'd go crazy at the thought of having to start any new piece with me because I swear she felt I didn't have it in me to play anything remotely difficult. But when I played this Etude, Miss Secunda said I played it "like an artist."

MOTHER: (*Still searching through the closet*): One of these days I really have to sort out this stuff.

FATHER: Did you hear that?

MOTHER: Did I hear *what*?

FATHER: What I just said.

MOTHER: No. What did you just say?

FATHER: I said Miss Secunda said I played this piece "like an artist".

MOTHER: Look! I found your tie!

FATHER (*in a daze*): Can you imagine? Like an "artist."

MOTHER: Pretty ratty looking, eh? Do you want me to iron it or not?

FATHER: Miss Secunda never wanted me to stop. She wanted me to become a concert pianist. She even thought it was a waste of time to get married.

MOTHER: Oh really?

FATHER: "Marriage is too limiting", she said. "If you want to be a success—and especially on the concert stage—you have to concentrate on being a success. And getting involved with other people dampens your progress." (*Shrugs*) That's what she said.

MOTHER: So that's why you never introduced me to Miss Secunda.

FATHER: No! Don't be silly.

MOTHER: I always wondered why I never met her.

FATHER: Will you stop it. I didn't introduce you because I was ending my lessons, and I thought, "Why bother?"

MOTHER: I thought it was because you didn't think they'd approve of me.

FATHER: What an imagination!

MOTHER: You were so artsy-craftsy then. Taking me to concerts and art museums all the time. I thought you were trying to make me over for them.

FATHER: You're talking nonsense.

MOTHER: Well, I was only the poor baker's daughter.

FATHER: What does that have to do with it?

MOTHER: I always had the funny feeling you were embarrassed because I wasn't "fine" enough or something.

FATHER: Oh God!

MOTHER: I was ready to take some piano lessons myself.

FATHER: Honestly you're silly.

MOTHER: I loved you very much. I wanted you to love me.

FATHER (*annoyed*): I loved you.

MOTHER: You didn't introduce me to Miss Secunda.

FATHER: Will you stop that.

MOTHER: I used to think Miss Secunda was my competition.

FATHER: That's a laugh.

MOTHER: You must have been like a son to her. Or even a lover.

FATHER: You don't know what you're saying. I was five years old when I met her. *(Pause)*. I just wish I could wave a wand and play like I use to. Just for tonight.

MOTHER: Well you can't. You grew up. You got married. You have a family. So what if you're not Arthur Rubenstein.

FATHER: *Artur*.

MOTHER: *Artur!* What does it matter? You've grown into a very responsible person. Respected and admired by friends and co-workers. Isn't that enough? Someone has to take the tickets and keep the books so to speak. Everyone can't be an "artist."

FATHER *(rises, deep in thought)*: They never liked my father, you know. He didn't appreciate the Ballet so they thought he was a barbarian or something. Of course my mother thought they were gods. In fact, on one of the records I have of my playing the piano, she composed a speech for me to learn thanking them for all they did for me. I was afraid that one day, in her overzealousness to please them, she might just hand me over to them completely. Good God! Can you imagine what *that* would have been like? I would have spent the rest of my life giving recitals, trying to pronounce "Cho-Paa," and wondering if my hands were clean enough.

MOTHER: Well you shouldn't have played if it bothered you so.

FATHER: I wasn't programmed to say "no." I was the kind of kid that did what he was told. If Miss Secunda asked me to play, I played. What I really wanted, though, was to be an actor.

MOTHER: An actor?

FATHER: It was my dream to go to the High School of Performing Arts.

MOTHER: I never knew that.

FATHER: I figured if they heard me play I could get in on my music, and then once in, switch over and take theatre. *(Pause)* Miss Secunda said I didn't play well enough. So I didn't take the test.

MOTHER *(After a pause. Quietly)*: I think you're wonderful.

FATHER: Do you?

MOTHER: Yes. I'm very proud of you. And you should be proud of yourself too.

FATHER (*Flatly*): I work in plastics.

MOTHER: You're an up-and-coming young executive in a large corporation.

FATHER: I supervise salesmen . . . who sell plastics.

MOTHER: You're a responsible, honest, hard-working young member of the business community. Why there's no telling where you'll go in the company.

FATHER: It ain't "art."

MOTHER: So what?

FATHER: So . . . look at all the years I spent taking piano lessons, and now look at me.

MOTHER: I'm looking.

FATHER: Well, I spent a lot of years doing one thing—and now I'm doing another.

MOTHER: What's so strange about that? A lot of people can say that. Some study Law and become salesmen. You took Music and ended up in Business. I don't see what is so awful.

FATHER: Well, she probably won't ask me what I do anyway. I mean she knows I didn't go around the world concertizing.

MOTHER: You sound almost ashamed.

FATHER: I'm not ashamed. I just don't think it's important enough to discuss tonight. Besides, she knew I had to stop taking piano lessons when my father died. She *knew* that. "Have to go to work to support my mother," I said. Couldn't go on taking lessons forever, could I? I mean, I wasn't going to be a musician or anything. I think seventeen years of lessons were enough . . . don't you?

MOTHER: Yes, I think it was enough.

FATHER: Actually if my father hadn't of died, I'd probably still be taking lessons. Practicing. And for what? Listening to them say "It isn't right. It isn't what we wanted." It was always what *they* wanted. Not what *I* wanted. My phrasing wasn't graceful enough. I remember they were always harping on my damn phrasing. "Elegant! Be elegant," they'd say. "You're not being elegant enough." Christ, they'd drive you crazy. And what the hell did I know about elegance? I was nine years old. But when my father died, I said, "I can't take lessons any-

more." Miss Secunda said I'd be throwing away my life if I stopped.

MOTHER: She didn't say that.

FATHER: Oh yes she did. She said it all right. I knew she'd put up a fuss if I wanted to quit. I remember how nervous I was when I told her.

MOTHER: What were you afraid of?

FATHER: I don't know. I guess I didn't want to hear Miss Benjamin say, "I knew it." She always acted so righteous. She was sure I'd turn out like Rhoda Hackett.

MOTHER: Who was Rhoda Hackett?

FATHER: Some little rich girl who was only interested in whether or not her gloves matched her hat. She never practiced. Miss Benjamin finally pressured Miss Secunda to stop teaching her.

MOTHER: So? Were you more interested in whether your gloves matched your hat?

FATHER: You're missing the point.

MOTHER: What's the point?

FATHER: The point is Miss Benjamin didn't want her time wasted. If you were going to buckle down and work—fine! But if you weren't . . . If you were there just because someone was paying for it—then forget it. She didn't want to teach you.

MOTHER: Well, she was right. What's the sense of teaching someone who doesn't want to learn?

FATHER: Well, I didn't want to learn.

MOTHER: Then you should have stopped.

FATHER: I told you . . . I *wanted* to stop. But they wouldn't let me.

MOTHER: Who's "they"?

FATHER: My mother. Miss Secunda. Christ, I didn't even have a minute to myself. You never knew when Miss Secunda was going to call up and say some kid got sick and I could have his time if I hurried right over. I wanted to say, "Well, I don't want it! I want to go to the movies! I don't want to be a concert pianist. I don't want to give recitals. I don't want to make recordings!"

MOTHER: You should have told her—"I don't want to play the piano anymore."

FATHER: I was afraid.

MOTHER: Afraid of what?

FATHER: I don't know. I don't know. I know Miss Secunda had plans for me. I knew she wanted me to *be* something.

MOTHER: Well, you *are* something.

FATHER: I mean musically. And I felt it wasn't right for me to question it.

MOTHER: You just should have put your foot down if it bothered you so.

FATHER: I wanted to say "no more". I wanted to say "enough". *(Pause)* But I couldn't. When my father died I told her, "I have to go to work." But it didn't matter. So what if I had to earn money? I could come on weekends. And I thought, "Oh God! I have to do something!" So I explained I'd have to get a part time job on Saturdays and Sundays to earn an extra income. Then I was so afraid she'd check up on me, I actually went out and found a part-time job just to make sure she couldn't make me out to be a liar. *(Laughs)* That's how I got into Plastics. The people at the factory must have thought I was on skates the way I raced around there. I worked myself into a frenzy thinking, "I'd better look busy just in case Miss Secunda ever decided to pop in to see if I was actually working." *(Even he laughs at this)*

MOTHER: It sounds like a bigger plot than World War II. A simple "No" would have been sufficient.

FATHER: Well, it's over, so it doesn't matter. It's long long, long been over. *(He retreats back to the piano and begins playing again)*

MOTHER: I'm going to look in our closet for those dresses. Maybe I put them in there. *(As an afterthought)* I think you're worrying for nothing. *(She exits)*

FATHER *(alone)*: It'll take ten years to play the way I used to—and I only have ten minutes.

(He begins to play the Black Key Etude again. Only this time very slowly. Now he plays only the right hand. Then only the

left. Now he puts the two hands together and plays the same passage. To himself)

Play each note as clear as a bell. Lift each finger as high as you possibly can.

(He makes too many mistakes and stops).

Maybe I should play something “slower.”

(He gets up, lifts open the piano bench and takes out another book of music)

The Schubert Impromptus.

(He opens the book to a certain page and begins playing the G-Flat Impromptu)

Keep each note in the harmony as quiet as you can. As quiet as you can. That’s no good.

(He stops. A pause. He starts again)

You have to hear every note no matter how softly you play it.

(He plays it slowly and softly, but many of the notes do not sound simply because he does not have the control he once had)

FATHER: Keep the inner voices quiet. Let the melody sing.

(He hits another “clinker”)

Ouch! That one hurt. Fingers nice and high. Each note has to sound like rain on a petal.

(He hits another clinker)

Sing out the melody!

(More wrong notes)

Keep going. Don’t stop for wrong notes. Keep going. Just sing out the melody.

(But he hits quite a few wrong notes in a row and it is too much for him)

SHIT!!

(Bangs the piano with his fists. He rises in frustration, but just as quickly, he sits down again. He tries the piece once more)

Slower. Sl-ow-er. S-L-O-W-E-R. Make the music sing. It

doesn't matter if the notes are wrong. Play the soul. The rest will follow.

(Mother re-enters)

MOTHER: I found the dresses. They're in there putting them on, but I doubt if they're going to fit.

FATHER: How does it sound?

MOTHER: It sounds all right to me.

FATHER *(still playing)*: They'll know the difference. They'll know I haven't practiced. They'll hear it.

MOTHER: I thought you weren't going to play for them.

FATHER: What am I going to say if they ask?

MOTHER: Say "No."

FATHER: They're going to say I let "seventeen years of piano lessons go down the drain."

MOTHER: You have other priorities in your life.

FATHER: They don't understand "other priorities."

MOTHER: Well, it's a little late—if you're thinking of practicing now.

FATHER *(rises)*: I'm going to call this whole thing off.

MOTHER: Call it off? What for?

FATHER: I don't think we're ready for this dinner. Honestly, you don't know them. Maybe in a few weeks . . .

MOTHER: Listen, I spent all day getting ready. I don't know what you're talking about. I've cleaned and cooked and . . . I've made a very nice meal.

FATHER: You know some people require a little more care and attention to detail.

MOTHER: We're as ready as we'll ever be—believe me.

FATHER: I just would have felt more comfortable if we had more time.

MOTHER: It's been two weeks since they called. How much more time do you want?

FATHER: We shouldn't have invited them the first time they called.

MOTHER: What could I do? This woman calls and gushes about how wonderful it would be to see you again and maybe we could get "together soon"—so I invited her to dinner. I thought you'd like that.

FATHER: You should have asked me first.

MOTHER: You weren't home. She called me while you were at work. What was I supposed to say? Call back and I'll check with my husband? She sounded so anxious to meet me and the children. Good God, I certainly heard enough about *her*. So I invited her. Shoot me.

FATHER (*not listening*): Maybe we could call them up and make some sort of excuse.

MOTHER: They're going to be here in ten minutes. Where are you going to call them? (*She lights up a cigarette*)

FATHER: How about if we just don't answer the bell?

MOTHER: Are you serious?

FATHER: We'll pretend we're not here.

MOTHER: I don't believe you.

FATHER: Really, I'm serious. We'll pretend we thought it was next week.

MOTHER: Look, I'm sorry I invited them without asking your permission—but I am not going to hide in the closet for you.

FATHER: I asked you not to smoke.

MOTHER: They're not here yet, are they?

FATHER: So what? They'll smell it. (*Goes to the window and opens it wide as he can*) Christ sakes—I ask you one favor—PL-EASE! Just for tonight—don't smoke! (*He comes back to the piano*)

MOTHER: This is my house too, you know. (*Suppressing her anger*) I think I should be able to smoke if I want to.

FATHER: I'm asking you not to smoke tonight.

MOTHER (*putting out cigarette*): Shit!

FATHER: And don't say "shit."

MOTHER: Why not?

FATHER: Just don't say it.

MOTHER: Why not? What would happen if I said "shit?"

FATHER: Would you stop that?

MOTHER: Would they shrivel up and die?

FATHER: I asked you to stop it.

MOTHER: You think they never heard that word before? (*Stubbornly*) I want to know. What would be so terrible if I said "shit" and smoked a cigarette?

FATHER: Will you stop it??

MOTHER: I'd just like to know what you're so damn touchy about!

FATHER (*exploding*): I DON'T WANT MISS SECUNDA TO HEAR YOUR FOUL MOUTH, O.K.??

(*His fingers get caught playing the piano*)

O-u-c-h!! Now look what you make me do.

MOTHER: What did you do?

FATHER: Oww. Jesus!

MOTHER: Let me see it.

FATHER: Get a bandaid will ya? For Christ sakes, it's bleeding.

MOTHER: Let me see it. (*Looking at his finger*) How did you do that?

FATHER: You got me so mad, my fingers got all balloxed up in the crack.

MOTHER: How can that happen?

FATHER: Christ Almighty! Stop asking me so many questions. I need a bandaid.

MOTHER: Maybe you should put on some Mercurochrome. Looks like a little blood under the nail.

FATHER: Yeah, get some Mercurochrome, too.

(*She exits. He goes to the couch, holding his finger. Before he sits, he*

notices the pillows on the couch again, and with his one free hand, he removes two of them and places them on the chair opposite him. Now he sits. Mother re-enters with the Mercurochrome and the bandaids)

MOTHER: Here, we'll put this on first.

FATHER: Careful. Careful. That burns.

MOTHER *(She has not put it on his finger yet)*: Mercurochrome does not burn. Iodine burns.

FATHER: Well, it stings then.

MOTHER: God, you're such a baby. Hold still.

FATHER: Gently. For Christ Sakes, gently! *(Now she puts the bandaid on)* Don't you have anything bigger?

MOTHER: It covers the cut.

FATHER: This is going to fall off. Don't we have any gauze? Maybe we could wrap it around and tie with that whadayacallit tape?

MOTHER: It's not that big a cut.

FATHER: Well, this shitty little bandaid is not going to hold.

MOTHER: All right. All right. I'll tape up your finger. I don't believe it. Now I have to find the gauze.

(She exits. He rises and again exchanges the pillows on the chair to the couch. A moment later, she re-enters with gauze, tape and scissors)

I don't see how you manage to do these things. *(She begins wrapping the gauze around his finger)*

FATHER: Wrap it around a few times, will ya.

MOTHER: Such a baby.

FATHER: Tighter.

MOTHER: What do you want me to do? Cut off the circulation?

FATHER: I just don't want it to unravel.

MOTHER: It won't unravel. It looks pretty silly if you ask me. All this gauze for one little cut.

FATHER *(his hand on the couch seat)*: What's this?

MOTHER: What's what?

FATHER: There are crumbs all over this couch.

MOTHER: What are you talking about?

FATHER: Feel it. There are crumbs all over this couch. *(He stands up and begins shaking the slipcover rather agitatedly)*

MOTHER: What are you doing?

FATHER: We have to clean it off.

MOTHER: I haven't finished wrapping this bandage. Will you please sit down?

FATHER: Well, you can't have people come in to your home with no place to sit down.

MOTHER: You're going to dirty the whole floor that way. You're acting so crazy.

FATHER: Well for Christ sakes, we can't have them sitting on this couch with all these damn crumbs.

MOTHER: I'll get the vacuum cleaner in a minute—but let me finish wrapping this bandage first.

FATHER: We should have had this slipcover cleaned. It's filthy!

MOTHER: That's why I bought these pillows, see? *(She takes them off the chairs and places them on the couch)* It takes away from the dirt a little.

FATHER: I don't see how we have the nerve to entertain anyone in this apartment.

Why do we have to eat in the living room anyway? Why can't we have a dining room like everyone else? I never wanted the television set in here either.

I think the children watch too much television! We ought to do something about that.

They should spend more time reading. Good God, I sometimes wonder what kind of parents we really are.

MOTHER: I don't know what you're going on about.

FATHER: It annoys me that we live this way.

MOTHER: What way?

FATHER: This way! Look around you. Look at this place. Look at the furniture. For God sakes, just look at it.

MOTHER: We have young children. What do you want? *House Beautiful?*

FATHER: I just want to come home after a hard day's work and know I have a place to sit down. And I want to know my kids are doing something constructive. Not just wasting their time watching television all day. Why don't they read more? Listen to classical music or something?

MOTHER: Classical music?

FATHER: Yes. What's wrong with that? When I was a kid I didn't just sit around doing nothing.

MOTHER: They're six and eight years old.

FATHER: I don't care. We should be taking them to museums. Concerts. The ballet. Exposing them to beauty!

MOTHER: They're nice, normal kids who go to school, watch a little television, play and eat. What's wrong with that?

FATHER: I don't know. I can't talk to you today. You're so . . . so . . . ornery.

MOTHER: I'm only saying . . .

FATHER: Forget it. I know what you're saying. You're saying you're right and I'm wrong.

MOTHER: I'm saying I don't know what you're suddenly in such a snit about.

FATHER: I don't want them sitting around all day watching television! I'd like them to be a little inventive . . . creative.

MOTHER: They're six and eight years old.

FATHER: Mozart was writing symphonies when he was eight.

MOTHER: Is that what's bothering you? They're not writing music yet?

FATHER: I'm saying they waste their time "watching" when they should be "doing".

MOTHER: *They're six and eight years old!*

FATHER: I haven't got time to argue with you. I have to finish dressing and take out the garbage.

MOTHER: What garbage?

FATHER: The garbage in the kitchen.

MOTHER: We have *one* empty olive jar.

FATHER: Well, then I'll take out the *one* empty olive jar. (*She stares at him quizzically*) I don't want any bugs in the apartment. Does it bother you if I take it out?

MOTHER: No. Go right ahead. Take out the garbage.

FATHER: That's all I need is for them to walk into the kitchen and see the garbage.

(He exits. She stands there watching him. A second later, the Daughters enter. They are wearing the dresses, which look a little tight and quite short. They walk in rather uncomfortably)

MOTHER (*amused*): Oh God! I knew they wouldn't fit. Come here. (*Daughters walk to their Mother*) Try and sit down. (*They try to sit. It is difficult*) All right. I've seen enough. Go back in the bedroom and put on those pants again.

DAUGHTER #1: Will Daddy be mad at us?

MOTHER: Of course not. Why would be mad at you?

DAUGHTER #2: He wants us to look pretty for Miss Secunda.

MOTHER: Don't worry. You'll look pretty for Miss Secunda.

DAUGHTER #1: We'll wear dresses. It's all right.

MOTHER: Nonsense! I want you kids to be comfortable. It's ridiculous for you to wear something that doesn't fit properly.

DAUGHTER #2: Miss Secunda doesn't like pants.

MOTHER: Who told you that?

(Daughters look at one another—unable to say)

Now listen to me. And listen carefully. Miss Secunda is only a person. A person who used to know your father when he was a little boy. She taught him how to play the piano. That's all. And tonight she's coming to our house as a guest. To eat dinner with us. After tonight we probably will not see her again for

another fifteen years--so it doesn't matter if she likes pants or not. She isn't important enough for us to change our whole lives for. Do you understand?

DAUGHTER #1: Daddy is going to be mad.

MOTHER (*Losing her temper*): Daddy is NOT going to be mad! I'm sorry. I don't mean to sound angry. It's just that it's so silly for us to be so concerned about the way we look. We are inviting Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin into our home. We are trying to make their visit pleasant. We are going to give them a nice supper. There isn't anything else they can ask or expect of us.

(*Father re-enters, sees Daughters*)

FATHER: Oh good. Let me see how you look.

MOTHER: They're too tight.

FATHER: Let me see. Walk around a bit.

MOTHER: They don't have to walk around. You can see they don't fit.

FATHER: Why I think they look very pretty. All we have to do is get out those white Mary Jane shoes and put their hair in . . . well, sort of pigtails.

MOTHER: Pigtails!??

FATHER: Yes. Wouldn't you girls like that?

MOTHER: They've never worn pigtails in their life!

DAUGHTER #2: We could try it for tonight.

FATHER: You'll see. It'll look very nice. I'll go get the shoes. (*He exits into the bedroom*)

DAUGHTER #1: Daddy's going to be mad. Those shoes don't fit anymore either.

MOTHER: Well, we'll just have to humor him along, won't we?

DAUGHTER #1: Can I wear my new sneakers?

MOTHER: No. I'm afraid not. Hey! How about your bedroom slippers? They sort of look like sandals. How would that be?

DAUGHTER #2: They're under the couch. (*She goes down on her knees and the dress rips*) Oh! Oh!

MOTHER: What happened?

DAUGHTER #2 (*Showing Mother the sides*): It ripped.

MOTHER: Well that sure as shootin' proves it. I said they were too tight.

(*Father re-enters with Mary Jane shoes*)

FATHER: Here we are. Now all we have to do is put these on, comb your hair, and we're all set. Here, sit down over there and I'll help you. You do their hair.

(*Daughters walk uncomfortably over to the couch*)

MOTHER: They're not going to fit.

FATHER: Please.

MOTHER: Don't you think this thing has gone far enough?

FATHER: Would you please! (*Emphatically*) I'd like to see them with these shoes on.

MOTHER: You're making them very uncomfortable. You're making *me* very uncomfortable.

FATHER: Would you just do their hair!

MOTHER: Why can't they wear their hair the way they always do? Why must they be all gussied up? You're not showing off a prize hog, you know.

FATHER (*After a pause. Very quietly. Very dramatically*): You're sounding hysterical . . . and Miss Secunda will be here in a few minutes.

MOTHER: I don't care if they walk in and we're throwing dishes at one another.

FATHER: I don't see what's so terrible about being presentable.

MOTHER: Presentable?? For who?? She is not the God damn Queen of England!

FATHER: You're blowing everything out of proportion. Just because I want them to wear a dress and comb their hair.

MOTHER: You're the one who's making this whole thing into a production. Making us feel we have to look a certain way. Act a certain way

FATHER: Why don't you just calm down?

MOTHER: I'm calm. Believe me. I'm calm.

FATHER: No one is asking you to be anything but yourselves.

MOTHER: I'm not the one who was carrying on because there were crumbs on the couch. I'm not the one worried about the garbage piling up. I'm not telling everyone what to say and how to say it.

FATHER: All right. All right. Forget it already. Forget it!
You've said your piece. I don't know where this is getting us.

MOTHER: You never see where this is getting us when I want my say.

FATHER: They are going to be here in a few minutes. For God sakes—stop fighting me. What do you want me to say? They don't have to wear dresses?? Is that what you want?? All right! All right! They don't have to wear these dresses. Are you satisfied??

(He stands up and throws the shoes down on the floor. Daughters, frightened by this outburst, cling to Mother.)

MOTHER: You're frightening the children.

FATHER: You get me so God damn angry—and you do this ALL the time. As soon as I want something done a certain way you pull at it and pull at it until what I want looks ridiculous.

MOTHER: That's not true.

FATHER: I can never get my way around here. *(Suddenly—to Daughters.)*

Go into your room and put these shoes on. Hurry up!

(Daughters exit)

Everything in this house is the way *you* want it. And I asked you—*please* let them wear dresses tonight. It was important to me. Didn't I say that? I say it was important to me?

MOTHER: They *don't fit*! They're old—and the shoes wouldn't fit either. They've outgrown them.

FATHER: Nothing in this house fits!

MOTHER: That's not their fault. They're growing.

FATHER: You knew Miss Secunda was coming for dinner. You knew it two weeks ago when she telephoned you, and *YOU* invited her here. And I asked you then to see that the children had everything they needed to be ready.

MOTHER: I don't know what the hell you're carrying on about. They're not going to disgrace you for God's sakes! They're clean. I washed and ironed their clothes myself. There's nothing wrong with the way they looked.

FATHER: I asked you not to smoke, didn't I?

MOTHER: I . . .

FATHER: I asked you to fix your hair.

MOTHER: For Christ sakes! . . . I didn't put up my hair. So what? Look, I've worked very hard to bring off this dinner. I don't care if Miss Secunda comes or not. She isn't my old piano teacher. It means nothing to me. But obviously it means something to you so I worked very hard to make everything as nice as possible. But we can't be something we're not. If she doesn't like us—(*shrugs*) she doesn't like us.

FATHER: Will you stop saying that?

MOTHER: Well, I'm sorry. That's what you've been intimating all night long. If everything isn't all just "so"—there'll be a major tragedy.

FATHER: I just wanted certain things to be done—and certain things to look a special way. I happen to know what Miss Secunda likes.

MOTHER: Screw Miss Secunda! This is my home—and she's *my* guest.

FATHER: I can't talk to you. I just can't talk to you.

MOTHER: What are you so afraid of? What does it matter if my hair isn't curled? What does it matter if there are a few crumbs on the couch? We're people. Normal everyday people with garbage in garbage bags . . . in the kitchen.

FATHER: Will you stop it. Please, stop it!

MOTHER: Why do we have to pass inspection?

FATHER: No one has to pass inspection.

MOTHER: Then why do we have to pretend so much? Why do we have to act a certain way, dress a certain way to be accepted? What would happen if Miss Secunda saw us as we really are? What is so terrible about "us"?

FATHER: It isn't us. It's you! You and your slapdash way of doing things. You think you can throw a tablecloth down and put up a roast and invite people to dinner, and it'll be all right.

MOTHER: Oh? And why isn't it all right? What's wrong with my dinner?

FATHER: There are certain things that require a little extra attention, and I think you shouldn't have invited these people here if you weren't going to put yourself out a little.

MOTHER: Put myself out a little?!!

FATHER: Yes!

MOTHER: You don't know what you're talking about. I've been preparing for this meal all day.

FATHER: Really? You put a lousy roast in the oven, and every few hours you throw some gravy on it and you call that "preparing all day"?

MOTHER: Then don't eat it—I don't care.

FATHER: And look at this place. It's like a pigsty in here. When do you ever clean it so that it looks presentable?

MOTHER: If you don't stop acting so damn crazy . . .

FATHER: And look at you. You never care about what you put on—or how your hair looks.

MOTHER: I do my hair.

FATHER: Yes. When it suits you. But not when I ask you to have it look a certain way. Christ Almighty, if you want to look so sloppy then you should stay in your room. Yes, go in there and I'll serve the dinner.

MOTHER: You will not. I made this dinner and I'm going to serve it.

FATHER: I don't know why you *don't* stay in your room anyway. You can curse and smoke your damn fool head off all you want.

MOTHER: I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to be right here and smoke "my damn fool head off" anyway. And if Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin don't like it—they can just lump it.

FATHER: No! I don't want you here. I'm not going to let you make a fool out of me. I don't want Miss Secunda to meet you. I'd be too ashamed.

MOTHER: Why you bastard! You rotten bastard. Who do you think you are—telling me how I have to look and what I have to say for some farty piano teacher.

FATHER: Listen to you. Listen to your language. You sound like a common street hooker.

MOTHER: And what about you? (*An unflattering imitation*) "Don't ask me to play the piano tonight. I don't want Miss Secunda to know I haven't practiced in fifteen years." A grown man cowering in the face of his old piano teacher coming to dinner! What kind of a man are you? Are you that much of a coward you couldn't stand up and say "Enough! I don't want any more lessons!! I hate playing the piano!!" You're telling me I'm not dressed properly? I'm not presentable enough to meet this emasculating bitch??

FATHER: I don't want you here tonight. I mean it.

MOTHER: And how the hell are you going to stop me? How the hell are you going to stop me from being in this room? I'll serve this God damn dinner in a way she'll never forget. (*She throws a plate on the floor*) "How did you like your fruit cup Miss Secunda?? Are you ready for your soup? Well watch out—cause here it comes! (*She throws another plate down*) How about some music with your dinner? I've got a record of your old pupil here playing the Black Key Etude. How'd you like to listen to that? (*She puts the record on*) And after the sherbet I'm sure if you ask real nice he'll sit down and play for you— in person! Won't you, dear? Won't you play the God damn Black Key Etude for Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin?

FATHER: You bastard!

(The music blares away)

MOTHER: That's right. Let Miss Secunda hear what a dirty mouth *you* have.

FATHER: You rotten bastard.

MOTHER: And after you play the Black Key Etude, maybe you can tell then how you peed all over their God damned front door. Pervert! Little twelve year old pervert.

FATHER: I'm warning you—you're making me angry.

MOTHER: Pervert! Little twelve year old pervert.

FATHER: You God damn bitch! *(He slaps her face)*

MOTHER: You bastard. How dare you!

(She tries to slap him back. A struggle ensues. He picks up a large carving knife from the table and lunges at her, stabbing her repeatedly)

Stop it! Stop it!

FATHER: I told you I didn't want them here. I told you! I told you!

MOTHER: Stop it! Stop it!

FATHER: I didn't want her in my house. I didn't want them here judging everything.

MOTHER: Please Stop. Please stop. Oh God! Oh God!

FATHER: I told you they wanted perfection. I told you. I told you. And I have to give it to them!

(The Mother sinks to the floor. He stands over her breathing heavily. The music stops and the young voice is heard once more)

YOUNG VOICE: And now I wish to express my sincerest thanks to

two people who have opened up their hearts to enrich my life. I was indeed blessed when I was given two such outstanding personalities to guide my destiny in Music. The understanding, patience, and undying efforts in my behalf musically as well as personally have been nothing less than the epitome of inspiration.

(As the record continues the Father picks up the body and carries it into the bedroom)

The first rule I shall always remember is to live my life as a decent human being. After those years of blessed, inspired association, how could I miss? I can only say in conclusion that wherever my future paths may lead, I hope they will shed some glory on Miss Secunda and Miss Benjamin.

(The Father re-enters. He sits, his eyes glazed, his body motionless. Daughters re-enter as the recording stops)

DAUGHTER #1: You said you'd help us with our shoes.

DAUGHTER#2: We're finished dressing now. All you have to do is tie our shoes. *(Daughters nestle under his arms)*

DAUGHTER #1: Is it eight o'clock yet?

DAUGHTER#2: Here Daddy, tie this please. *(Her foot is on his lap. The Father absentmindedly begins to thread her shoelace and ties the bow)*

DAUGHTER #1: Will you tell Miss Secunda that we've been good? Will you? Will you tell her?

DAUGHTER#2: If you tell her, will she give us piano lessons? Huh?

DAUGHTER #1: Tighter, Daddy. Tighter. You have to make it tighter.

DAUGHTER #2: Will you tell Miss Secunda, Daddy, huh? Will you?

(The Father looks down at the Daughters' hands. Sees the nail polish)

FATHER: Miss Secunda doesn't think little children should wear nail polish. I remember she didn't like my cousin because of that.

DAUGHTERS: We could wash it off.

FATHER: Yes. Wash it off. Hurry.

(Daughters run out of the room)

FATHER: *(Rises. Turns off the machine)*: I'll have to tell them she was called away. I'll tell them her mother was ill and she went to look after her.

(Now he begins to straighten his hair and clothes and looks about the Living Room once more, arranging things to his satisfaction. The Daughters re-enter. As they do, the mantel clock begins to chime eight bells. He looks up. The front door buzzer rings. His body jerks a little)

FATHER: Right on time.

DAUGHTERS: They're here! They're here! *(They begin to jump up and down)*

FATHER: They always were sticklers for punctuality.

(Daughters run to the couch and take their seats—almost as if the ringing of the bell is their cue. The Father adjusts their dresses and for good measure places their hands serenely in their laps)

FATHER: Mommy wasn't feeling well, so I told her to go in and lie down.

DAUGHTER #1: Isn't she going to eat with us?

FATHER: No. We have to let her rest. You'll help me with the dinner tonight, won't you?

DAUGHTER #1: Oh yes!

FATHER: Good. Good.

(The buzzer rings again)

FATHER *(Rises. Looking at his bandaged hand)*: I'll tell them I was practicing and cut my hand. Yes. That's what I'll say. I was practicing the Black Key Etude and I cut my finger. Isn't that funny?

(Now he is at the front door. He breathes a deep last breath. He looks at the Daughters. Is everything in order? Smiling broadly, he opens the door wide)

Miss Secunda! Miss Benjamin! Hello! Hello! Welcome. Come in. Come in.

(He stands aside, waiting for them to enter)

CURTAIN

NOTICE

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Vatican

YVES THILLET

The warning, softened
with honey and gray hair
(hidden from view
behind the starched headpiece),
had the gentle tones
of mothers of small children
and kindergarten teachers.

The parchment of her face,
withered and crammed
with the fine lines
of years of holy life,
broke into bold new furrows
as she cautioned:

“If you’re not sure,
buy silver, gold or even glass.
Wooden rosary beads
need warmth and oils
of constant, daily hands.
Left alone they dry,
crack with time,
not too unlike
neglected skin
and lone forgotten lives.”

Making his first appearance as poet, Yves Thillet is a Puerto Rican psychiatrist. He lives in Merion, Pa. with his wife and four sons.

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